DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 508 CS 504 640

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TITLE An Examination of Current Conflict Management Training Practices in 10 Large American Organizations.
PUB DATE May 84
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (34th, San Francisco, CA, May 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Research; Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; *Employer Employee Relationship; Industrial Training; *Management Development; *Organizational Communication; Program Descriptions; Speech Communication; *Training Methods; Work Environment

ABSTRACT

To describe the conflict management training practices in 10 large American organizations, a study gathered descriptive data through interviews with organizational personnel responsible for training and development, a review of written materials where available, and observations of the delivery of conflict management training programs. The findings indicated that although varying in size, organizational functions, program design, and employee audiences, the 10 oranizations considered conflict management training to be of considerable importance for their respective employees. Professional level employees participated in diverse and complex discussions of concepts and causes of conflict and potential analytical processes with somewhat lesser attention given to management strategies and tactics. Training for supervisors, on the other hand, primarily addressed individual differences and behavior orientations, strategies, and tactics. Behavior strategies of forcing, smoothing, withdrawal, compromise, and confrontation were commonly presented as management strategies. However, much less specific were presentations of accompanying communicative tactics to enable these orientations and strategies. (The report includes five tables that group data according to participant criteria, program development and delivery, concepts and causes, analytical processes for understanding conflict, and conflict management strategies and tactics.) (HOD)

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AN EXAMINATION OF CURRENT CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TRAINING PRACTICES IN 10 LARGE AMERICAN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to describe current conflict management training practices in 10 large American organizations. Representing both the private and public sectors, selected organizations were chosen because of their stated commitment to training and development, varying sizes of employee populations, and diversity of organizational activities. Specifically, conflict management training practices are described for these organizations in the categories of annual number of program participants, position levels of participants, cost per participant, participant selection criteria, length of program, status of course offering, curriculum generation and delivery, and number of years for program existence. Additionally, content categories were developed from a review of conflict and organizational conflict literature. The 10 training programs are described by subject areas grouped into content categories of (1) concepts and causes of conflict, (2) analytical processes for understanding conflict, and (3) conflict management strategies and tactics. Results and implications for further research are discussed.

Introduction

While a singular definition of the concept of conflict finds no consensus among researchers, a vast array of literature attests to the importance of conflict for productive individual and organizational development. Individuals are admonished to confront conflict openly and honestly. Experts link organizational survival to the organization's ability to deal with conflict and other processes in order to strive for dynamic equilibrium with the larger environment. Even with this extensive focus on conflict, the general understanding of how to generate and develop productive conflict management skills and processes for both individuals and organizations is much less specific.

The purpose of this research was to describe current conflict management training practices in 10 large American organizations. Representing both the private and public sectors, the selected organizations were chosen because of their stated commitment to training and development, varying sizes of employee populations (ranging from 5,000 to 86,000), and diversity of organizational activities (high technology, manufacturing, oil, aerospace, defense, education, and municipal management). Specifically, conflict management training practices are described for these organizations in the categories of annual number of program participants, position levels of participants, cost per participant, participant selection criteria, length of program, status of course offering, curriculum generation and delivery, and numbers of years for program existence. Additionally, content categories were developed from a review of conflict and organizational conflict literature. The 10 training programs are described by subject

areas grouped into content categories of (1) concepts and causes of conflict, (2) analytical processes for understanding conflict, and (3) conflict management strategies and tactics.

The Importance of Conflict Management Training

There is considerable evidence to suggest that whether productive or not, conflict is of importance to managers in contemporary organizations. Thomas and Schmidt (1976), in a study for the American Management Association, reported that managers spend approximately 24 percent of their time dealing with conflict, and that managing conflict has become somewhat more important in the last ten years. These managers rated conflict management to be of equal or somewhat greater importance than planning, communication, motivation, or decision making. Lippitt (1982) identifies helping managers manage conflict as an essential management development activity. In discussing the inevitability of organizational conflict and its role in the decision-making process, Lippitt suggests that development activities should prepare managers to understand the causes of conflict, expand diagnostic capabilities, and develop coping methods.

The literature is diverse in recommendations for conflict management training. Louis (1977), in a criticism of the shortcomings of training approaches which emphasize the effects of another party's behavior and of background conditions upon an individual's conflict behavior, proposes a conceptual framework of the process through which an individual conceptualizes conflict and the impact of personal/developmental variables upon conceptualization. Louis considers this individual differences perspective important for training activities to approach understanding conflict from a nonmechanistic framework. Warehime (1980), in support of the individual

difference perspective, describes systematic training in coping skills which develops alternatives for functioning in conflict from personal actions and reactions at the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels.

Pondy (1967) observes that the functionality of conflict-handling behaviors can be determined only when the outcome criteria are understood. Thomas, Jamieson, and Moore (1978) distinguish between personal and organizational outcomes and note the importance for conflict theory to address these differences. Additionally, Thomas (1976) contends the potential duality of outcome criteria--personal and organizational--may provide useful insights for facilitation of conflict management and change programs in organizations and possibly explains resistance to such efforts.

Chesler, Crowfoot and Bryant (1978), recommend power training as an essential prerequisite for effective conflict management. They argue, that because multiparty conflict is a reciprocal endeavor, those who do not understand how to gain or use power cannot benefit from approaches in conflict management training which assume the recipients of training have power to utilize in the management process.

Thomas (1977), in recognizing strengths in diverse perspectives and utilizing conflict behaviors as an example, proposes that management education should utilize multi-dimensional values in teaching in order to avoid rejecting input, threats to self-esteem, abandoning individual strengths and reducing flexibility. The multi-dimensional approach in the Thomas description is wary of normative positions which do not place a complex perspective on functionality issues, emphasize individual strengths, and prepare for opportunities and problems which are largely dependent on the interface between individual assets and the needs of a specific situation.

Methodology

Conflict management training programs are described for organizations ranging in size from 5,000 to 86,000 employees. Organizations in the private sector are two high technology research and development, manufacturing and marketing corporations, two household products manufacturers, and a major oil company. Organizations in the public sector are a major university, a municipal government structure, an aerospace research and development group, and two defense agencies. In each of the organizations, training managers were contacted for descriptive information about their respective programs and permission to review program content and observe actual program delivery. Descriptive data were gathered through interviews with organizational personnel responsible for training and development, review of written materials where available, and in all 10 organizations, observation of the delivery of conflict management training programs. When training materials were not available in written formats, extensive notes and course outlines were developed from observations of program presentations. Notes and outlines were submitted to training managers and trainers for verification of accuracy prior to subject area grouping into content categories.

The training programs represented in the data were those identified by the training departments as the designated conflict management efforts of their organizations. Selection of these particular course offerings does not imply that other programs in management, communication, or problem solving, for example, also do not deal with conflict.

Results

Descriptions of Training Practices

Training department personnel in the 10 organizations described their

course offerings in nine categories: annual number of program participants, position levels of participants, cost of training per participant, participant selection criteria, length of program, status of course offering, generation of curriculum, delivery of curriculum, and numbers of years for program existence.

Annual program participant levels by organization ranged from 40 to 200. For all 10 organizations, 865 participants were trained during the survey year (1983). Of these 865, 410 or 47.4% were specifically designated as supervisors. Professional job classifications represented 315 or 36.4% of the participants. (Organizational records made it impossible to determine if some of these professional classifications also might have supervisory responsibilities.) Ninety or 10.4% of the participants were secretaries and 50 or 5.8% represented employees from any level within the organization. (The 50 "from any level" also may belong in any of the above categories.)

The organizations determined cost per participant either in charges back to participant departments or in cost per participant for budgeting within the training or human resources department. Cost per participant for the purposes of this research was estimated by training department personnel for the actual hours of training designated as conflict management training. For those programs where conflict management training was a module in a longer course, the cost per participant represents only those contact hours devoted to the conflict module. Cost per participant ranged from $15 to $75 for the various programs. Cost per hour for training ranged from $2.50 to $13.33.

Six of the 10 organizations presented a regular course offering dealing specifically with conflict management. Half of these programs were presented in three-hour sessions while half were delivered in a six-hour

training format. Two of the organizations presented conflict management training as part of longer programs while two programs were offered on an as-needed basis. All 10 programs utilized either the three- or six-hour training formats.

Only one of the organizations, the university, developed conflict training curriculum by utilizing internal specialists. The other nine hired external consultants--all from university departments of communication, psychology, and business--for curriculum development. Representing the only commonality across all 10 programs, curriculum design was by professionals with doctoral degrees in disciplines which research conflict processes. Once curriculum design was completed, four of the organizations presented course content with internal training and development specialists. The remaining six utilized external consultants for program delivery.

The 10 programs had been in existence from one to 10 years. In all cases training directors indicated programs would be continued and in six of the 10 cases there is the expectation that the programs will be expanded both in length and numbers of participants. Tables 1 and 2 summarize program participation and delivery by organizational type.

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Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

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Descriptions of Training Program Content

Utilizing a review of conflict and organizational literature as a theoretical base, the 10 programs were observed and written materials reviewed to describe course content by subject areas grouped into major content categories. Specifically, 18 subject areas were identified

and grouped into content categories of (1) concepts and causes of conflict, (2) analytical processes for understanding conflict, and (3) conflict management strategies and tactics. The Fink (1968) and Pondy (1966) reviews of conflict and organizational conflict literature, noting ranges of definitions for conflict which distinguish conflict from competition, discuss compatibility and incompatibility of goals, assess the impact of affective and perceptual processes, analyze environmental conditions, and monitor participant behaviors, were utilized to develop subject area categories appropriate for describing how the 10 programs presented concepts and causes of conflict. Subject descriptions for the analytical processes category were developed from the Thomas (1976) definition of process and structural models of dyadic conflict. The process model, according to Thomas, examines the sequence of events in a conflict episode while the structural model emphasizes environmental conditions which influence the behavior of conflict participants. For the final category, management strategies and tactics, subject areas were derived from the work of Blake and Mouton (1964), Hall (1969), and Thomas (1976), all of whom suggest five strategic behavior categories of forcing, smoothing, withdrawal, compromise, and confrontation. Subject area classifications at the tactical management level relied on the works of Riggs (1983) who argues that activeness and flexibility dimensions are important for evaluation of communicative acts and of Gibb (1961) who identifies climates for supportive communication behaviors. Following program observations, reviews of program materials, and interviews with training specialists, content from the 10 programs was divided into a series of subject areas which were then grouped on the basis of the previously described content categories of (1) concepts and causes of conflict, (2) analytical processes for understanding conflict, and (3) conflict management strategies and techniques.

The programs utilized eight separate subject areas to describe concepts and causes of conflict. All of the programs presented descriptions of conflict and emphasized individual differences as potential causes. Goal incompatibility as a source for conflict was discussed in four of the programs with three of the four considering additional conflict sources in organizational structures, rewards, environmental pressures, and resources. Programs designed for supervisors emphasized descriptions of conflict and individual differences while three of the four programs designed for professional levels emphasized diverse causes for conflict in addition to definitions and descriptions. Table 3 reports subject areas and presentation methodologies for the content category of concepts and causes.

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Insert Table 3 About Here

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Subject areas emphasizing conflict episodes, structural components, individual conflict strategies and orientations, and types of power were grouped into the analytical processes category. The subject area of individual conflict strategies and orientations was present in all 10 programs with lecture, discussion, and instrumentation focusing on the Blake and Mouton, Thomas, and Hall concepts of behavioral predispositions based on a balance between the satisfaction of personal needs and the satisfaction of needs of others in conflict. Additionally, three of the programs described conflict episodes in components similar to those of the Thomas process model while two presentations emphasized structural components of behavioral predispositions as related to incentives for conflict, the general environment, and the interaction rules of parties in conflict. Types of power were described in two programs developed for specific professional levels. In

general, those programs designed for professional level employees provided more complex and comprehensive models for analyzing conflict then programs developed for supervisors, secretaries, and general employee levels. Table 4 reports subject areas and presentation methodologies for the content category of analytical processes for understanding conflict.

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The management strategies and tactics category was represented by seven subject areas: strategic behaviors, supportive climates, descriptive language, nonverbal communication, feedback processes, active listening, and confrontation meeting formats. All 10 programs presented behaviors of smoothing, compromise, withdrawal, forcing and confrontation as primary strategic orientations for conflict management. Six of the programs, including all of those designed for supervisors, emphasized the use of descriptive language with five of the six presenting active listening as key for productive conflict management. Consideration was given to nonverbal communication and feedback processes in three presentations. The format for a confrontation meeting, present in two programs designed for supervisors, was extensive and incorporated specific tactical recommendations. Although all employee levels were introduced to behavioral strategies, supervisors were the primary recipients of tactical material. This emphasis was consistent with the individual differences approach prevalent for supervisors in the concepts and causes and analytical content categories. Conversely, professional levels received considerable information about diverse causes and analytical processes for understanding conflict and relatively little information for strategic and tactical choices for conflict

management. Tabel 5 reports subject areas and presentation methodologies for the conflict management strategies and tactics category.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

Although varying in size, organizational function, program design, and employee audiences, the 10 organizations in the study considered conflict management training to be of considerable importance for their respective employee populations. However, numbers of personnel receiving training and resource allocations for training, when compared to the size of the organizations, call into question the realistic potential for training to improve organizational conflict management processes. Additionally, no comprehensive means for evaluation existed for any of the programs. It was not possible in the 10 organizations to determine participant applicability of training materials to conflict situations within work environments. Without these assessments, discussions centering on adequacy of subject areas or resource allocations remain complex.

Professional level employees participated in diverse and complex discussions of concepts and causes of conflict and potential analytical processes with somewhat lesser attention given to management strategies and tactics. Training for supervisors, on the other hand, primarily addressed individual differences and behavior orientations, strategies, and tactics. In general, employees in the surveyed organizations were more likely to receive an individual differences and individual strategies orientation to conflict than explanations of conflict which emphasized environmental

components. Behavior strategies of forcing, smoothing, withdrawal, compromise, and confrontation were commonly presented as management strategies; however, much less specific were presentations of accompanying communicative tactics to enable these orientations and strategies.

Additional research is needed to assess the importance of a variety of subject areas including those represented in this paper and numerous potential others. Specifically, research defining subject areas for conflict management strategies and tactics is recommended.

Finally, this research must be viewed as only one limited way to understand the application of conflict management theory to organizational life. As such additional work is needed not only to describe conflict management training processes but in other areas of organizational life which demonstrate the development of conflict processes for both individuals and organizations.

TABLE 1

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TRAINING IN 10 ORGANIZATIONS

PARTICIPANT CRITERIA

Organization	Participation			Cost Per Trainee
	Professional Level	Individuals Selected	Average Number Trained Per Year	
Manufacturer -Company A	Supervisor	Self-Nominated in Qualified Category	40	$29
Manufacturer -Company B	Supervisor	Mandatory	200	$15
City	Supervisor	Nominated by Superior	50	$30
University	All	Open Enrollment	50	$22
Aerospace	R & D Engineers	Mandatory	75	$60
Defense -Corps A	All	Open Enrollment	50	$75
Defense -Corps B	Auditors	Nominated by Superior	40	$60
Oil Industry	Secretary	Mandatory	90	$40
High Technology -Company A	Supervisor	Mandatory	120	$35
High Technology -Company B	All	Open Enrollment	150	$45

TABLE 2

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TRAINING IN 10 ORGANIZATIONS

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY

Organization	When Offered	Specific Conflict Training Program[a]	Number of Conflict Training Hours[a]	Program Developers	Training Personnel	Number of Years Offered
Manufacturer - Company A	Regularly	Yes	6	Contract Specialists	Contract Specialists	2
Manufacturer - Company B	Regularly	Yes	6	Contract Specialists	Internal Specialists	3
City	Regularly	Yes	3	Contract Specialists	Contract Specialists	1
University	Regularly	No	3	Internal Specialists	Internal Specialists	5
Aerospace	Regularly	No	6	Contract Specialists	Internal Specialists	2
Defense - Corps A	When Requested	Yes	6	Contract Specialists	Contract Specialists	4
Defense - Corps B	When Requested	Yes	6	Contract Specialists	Contract Specialists	3
Oil Industry	Regularly	Yes	3	Contract Specialists	Internal Specialists	10
High Technology - Company A	Regularly	Yes	6	Contract Specialists	Contract Specialists	3
High Technology - Company B	Regularly	Yes	3	Contract Specialists	Contract Specialists	2

Note: [a]When a specific conflict management program was not provided conflict material was incorporated in other programs and the hours actually devoted to conflict are shown.

TABLE 3

CONFLICT TRAINING SUBJECT AREAS AND DELIVERY METHODOLOGIES FOR 10 PROGRAMS

CONTENT CATEGORY: CONCEPTS AND CAUSES

Subject Areas	Number of Programs Providing Subject Areas	Delivery Methodologies of Providing Program					
		Lecture	Discussion	Structured Activity	Instrumentation	Skill Building Activities	Support Materials (Films, Handouts, etc.)
Concepts:							
Conflict Definitions	3	3	3				
Conflict Descriptions	10	10	10	2			
Causes:							
Individual Differences	10	4	10				
Goal Incompatibility	4	4	4				
Organizational Structure	3	3	3				
Environmental Pressures	3	3	3				
Resource Supply	3	3	3				

TABLE 4

CONFLICT TRAINING SUBJECT AREAS AND DELIVERY METHODOLOGIES FOR 10 PROGRAMS

CONTENT CATEGORY: ANALYTICAL PROCESSES FOR UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Subject Areas	Number of Programs Providing Subject Areas	Delivery Methodologies of Providing Programs					
		Lecture	Discussion	Structured Activity	Instrumentation	Skill Building Activities	Support Materials (Films, Handouts, etc.)
Episode Analysis (Latent, perceived, felt, manifest, aftermath)	3	3	3	3			
Structural Analysis (Behavioral predispositions, social environment, Incentives, Interaction Rules)	2	2	2	2			
Individual Strategies/ Orientation Analysis (Forcing, Smoothing, Withdrawal, Compromise, Confrontation)	10	10	10		6		5
Power Base Analysis	2	2	2		2		

TABLE 5

CONFLICT TRAINING SUBJECT AREAS AND DELIVERY METHODOLOGIES FOR 10 PROGRAMS

CONTENT CATEGORY: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Subject Areas	Number of Programs Providing Subject Areas	Delivery Methodologies of Providing Programs				
		Lecture / Discussion	Structured Activity	Instrumentation	Skill Building Activities	Support Materials (Films, Handouts, etc.)
Strategic Behaviors (Forcing, Smoothing, Withdrawal, Compromise, Confrontation	10	10	4		6	
Supportive Climates	3	3			3	
Descriptive Language	6	6	4		6	5
Feedback Processes	3	3			3	3
Nonverbal Communication	3	3				3
Active Listening	5	5			5	
Confrontation Meeting Formats	2	2	1		2	2

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